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Congress of the United States
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November 7, 2019

The Honorable Michael R. Pompeo
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street NW
Washington, D.C. 20520

The Honorable Sam Brownback
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street NW
Washington, D.C. 20520

Dear Secretary Pompeo and Ambassador Brownback:

I write to express my concerns about the extreme, systematic violations of religious freedom in the Russian Federation and encourage the State Department to designate Russia a “Country of Particular Concern” (CPC) as outlined by the International Religious Freedom Act.

I recognize and applaud the State Department’s decisive action to designate Russia to Special Watch List status in 2018. Sadly, from the details of the *United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) 2019 Annual Report*, it is clear that Putin’s government has no intention of rolling back its brutal assault on certain communities of faith as has been the pattern described in State Departments’ *International Religious Freedom Report* on Russia for the past three years.

While the Kremlin grants special privileges to “traditional religions,” such as the Russian Orthodox Church, under the Yarovaya Law, many minority religious groups face considerable persecution and restriction. There are significant restrictions on religious practice, proselytization, property ownership, access to religious texts and online religious information for religious groups baselessly deemed “extremist.” Individuals in these groups also face the real threat of criminal investigation, violence, and incarceration.

As you know, in 2016, Russia enacted the Yarovaya Law, which includes vague language that enables suppression of religious activities under the guise of national security. It also utilizes blasphemy laws, influenced by the leadership of the Kremlin-aligned Russian Orthodox Church, that limit individuals’ freedom of speech. These operate as legal vehicles for the government to target minority religious groups. Such groups facing persecution include Jehovah’s Witnesses, the Church of Scientology, the Church of Jesus Christ Latter-day Saints, Tatar Muslims, Jewish organizations, evangelical Christian organizations, and other religious groups.

Since 2016, Russia has added nearly 1,300 religious texts to its federal list of banned texts, totaling more than 4,500 federally-banned religious texts in 2018. The government also censors religious pages online that it deems “extremist.” There are numerous instances of non-violent missionaries targeted by the Russian government, cases of the state seizing churches and places of worship, and criminal investigations into religious persons. In fact, mere membership in a banned religious association can be punishable by up to twelve years in prison. In 2018, 177 individuals were under arrest for their religious beliefs – a sharp increase from 70 in 2017.

A particularly egregious example of persecution by the Russian Government is its campaign against the Jehovah’s Witnesses. At the end of USCIRF’s reporting period in 2019, there were 121 Jehovah’s Witnesses under criminal investigation—an increase from 79 in 2018. Members of this group are severely restricted from their faith and are subject to state violence. In February 2019, seven Jehovah’s Witnesses in Siberia were tortured at the hands of local police—the victims were allegedly

stripped naked, bound, and beaten as they were interrogated. Just this week, Sergei Klimov, a member of the Jehovah's Witnesses, was sentenced to six years in prison for his religion.

Additionally, I am deeply concerned about discriminatory enforcement of visa requirements by the Russian government against U.S. citizens who were targeted due to their faith. I am grateful for the U.S. Embassy officials who have raised concerns with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs involving discriminatory enforcement of Russian law against U.S. citizens, and I encourage and support further engagement to ensure U.S. citizens of faith are not targeted.

As Americans, we must continue to stand up to oppression and advocate for the advancement of human rights in our bilateral relationships. I applaud the efforts of the Department of State, The Office of International Religious Freedom, and the U.S. Embassy in Russia for highlighting the critical importance of religious freedom under your leadership.

Russia's systematic, ongoing trampling of religious freedom must be stopped, and it is for the reasons outlined above that I encourage you to consider designating Russia a CPC. If you have any questions, please contact Josh Wentzel, Legislative Assistant, in my office at josh.wentzel@mail.house.gov or at (202) 225-6401. Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Mark Meadows', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Mark Meadows
Member of Congress